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A December to remember

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
A December to remember
DECEMBER 31, 2009

It has been a December to remember.

As the month comes to a close with a remarkable flurry of headline sports stories, its clear that this one month was not only one for the memory bank, but that it may have been the most fitting way to end a year that has certified the decade as the Naughty Naughties. What seemed like an awkward tag at the beginning of the new century has become a most appropriate signature phrase as this decade comes to its ignominious close.

The first shock of the month was the fall from grace of the poster boy for clean living and family values. Tiger Woods has gone from the slickest brand in the American pantheon of commerce, to the butt of jokes and ridicule that has spread across the internet with speeds generally associated with a particle accelerator. The number of such internet messages is in the range of the number of Tigers mistresses raised by the power of 100.

As is usual in cases like this, the media that touted the Tiger Brand as the genuine article to a gullible public, turned with fury and self-righteousness on the former model of perfection. Everybody loved Tiger, admired Tiger, wanted to be like Tiger, pointed to him as a perfect role model, and the world said yes. IMG, the International Management Group, had persuaded nearly all the major corporate sponsors of sport that this man was their man: the perfect golfer with the perfect image, and the quintessential sportsman.

We all got on board, even though we should have known better. America still wants its sports heroes cut from the Frank Merriwell at Yale mode, and Tiger Woods of Stanford looked like one of them. Instead Tiger is the perfect hollow man, lacking a center, lost without a compass, except for the one on his yacht that has become his shelter from the firestorm.

The self-righteousness of the media has been amusing as it always is in these cases. Tiger went from perfection to the satanic in the wink of a jaundiced eye. Even more amusing is how quickly the corporate world has cut its ties to the feline philanderer. Tiger Woods has become a non-person in a manner

that would have either embarrassed or created great envy from the experts in this field from the Stalinist universe.

Accenture, one of the major corporations that identified its brand with his brand, began removing all images and mention of Woods from company posters, advertising, and web sites. The consultants who once assured us all that Accenture knew what it takes to be a Tiger, was doing a makeover, a process which they had some familiarity.

Other sponsors have followed. Tag Hauer, the Swiss luxury watchmaker, announced it would scale down its association with Woods. Procter and Gamble lowered their Tiger profile withdrawing its Gillette ads featuring Woods. Then today AT&T pulled the plug on its Woods connection. Only Nike has remained faithful with Phil Knight saying that this whole thing was but a minor blip. There have been no TV commercials featuring Woods on television since late November.

Indeed Tiger Woods has vanished from public view and from the branded world in which we live. It is doubtful however that sex has disappeared from the PGA tour or any other sporting venue.

Sex and sport have been linked ever since the first whiff of testosterone was in the air. Faux sex surrounds all our sporting events where young women called cheerleaders and dancers decorate the landscape with wiggles, jiggles and giggles passing as a cross between glamorous role models and purveyors of sexual titillation.

Real sex is also present in the person of those women who make themselves available sexually to athletes, something star athletes at all levels take as a perk of their position. From the first experiences in middle school through the open access of the professional sports world, not much changes in the basic script.

In a very direct way the Tennessee Hostess Scandal is but an adjunct to the Tiger Woods affair. Sending young women from the University of Tennessee out to a high school football game on a recruiting trip is about as lame as it gets. Stories of attractive young women traveling hundreds of miles to see and be seen with naïve high school athletes who are targets on the football recruiting board, point to the issues of sexual access and the insane pressures surrounding intercollegiate athletics.

Such insanity was on display in the state of Florida in the last week when Urban Meyer, head football coach and minor deity, announced his retirement from coaching due to his health. This was followed by an outpouring of grief and angst throughout Gatorland. It was then followed by Meyers reversal of his decision. He will now take a leave of absence until he gets control of his world. This is comparable to most of us giving up breathing until we could live without having to do it constantly.

Meyer invoked health, family, and a sign from God in his decision, and in one of the best lines on the whole matter Mike Bianchi of the Orlando Sentinel described the reversal of the decision as Meyer calling an audible on God. The toll intercollegiate takes on coaches is well beyond that of only a decade ago when there was still a sliver of sanity to be found on some campuses. Today everyone must win now, and win every year, and not just have a winning record but win a national championship. And preferably more than one.

Intercollegiate madness of a slightly different sort reared its ugly head in Lubbock, Texas, where Mike Leach was fired as head football coach at Texas Tech after ten winning seasons. Leachs problem was not unlike that of Urban Meyer; only Leach took out the pressures on one of his players rather than on himself. As events unfolded it appeared that Leach had seen too many prison films as he locked up one of his players in isolation because the player couldnt perform on the field due to a concussion.

By the end of the month it looked like sports was over-populated by people unable to function sensibly, and most of them, so far as we know, were not suffering the aftereffects of a blow to the head.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a Happy New Year while reminding you that you dont have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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